

Alaska Congressional Delegation

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Delegation Introduces Legislation to Support Alaska Native Subsistence Whaling Efforts

The Alaska Congressional delegation introduced legislation in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives to ensure timely issuance by the Department of Commerce of catch limits for aboriginal subsistence hunting of bowhead whales by Alaska Native whalers who live in 11 Alaska communities. The companion bills would require the Secretary of Commerce to set catch limits for bowhead whales and issue aboriginal subsistence whaling permits under the Whaling Convention Act if the International Whaling Commission (IWC) fails to set such limits.

The delegation took this action because the current catch limits set by the International Whaling Commission are set to expire at the end of 2012. The United States is seeking renewal of the current catch limits for a six year period, from 2013 through 2018, but due to political differences over other issues the IWC may not act on the request at its upcoming annual meeting in Panama from July 2 to 6.

Sponsored by Sen. Mark Begich and co-sponsored by Sen. Lisa Murkowski in the Senate and Rep. Young in the House, the legislation would:

- Streamline the process for the U.S. to issue catch limits under the Whaling Convention Act, which is the existing legislation to implement the treaty;
- Ensure that any catch limits set by the U.S. are limited to the level set in the need statement provided by the U.S. to the IWC, are sustainable based on the most recent review of the bowhead stock by the IWC's Scientific Committee, and comply with all treaty requirements;
- Require the U.S. to continue to seek IWC adoption of catch limits, even after such limits are set under this legislation, thus ensuring continued compliance with all IWC practices.

“There can be no compromise on meeting the nutritional needs of the Inupiaq residents of the North Slope and if the IWC is unable to extend the subsistence catch limits, the U.S. government must be prepared to do so,” said. **Sen. Begich**, chairman of the Commerce Committee's Subcommittee on Oceans, Atmospheres, Fisheries and Coast Guard. “This would be in harmony with existing scientific standards and other provisions of the whaling convention and puts the

world community on notice that the U.S. is prepared to act to ensure the subsistence needs of our residents are met.”

“This legislation is needed to ensure that the remote Alaska communities that depend on bowhead whales for food do not experience any interruption of their subsistence hunts due to government inaction,” said **Sen. Murkowski**, co-chair of the Senate Oceans Caucus and member of the Senate Indian Affairs Committee. “These communities sit on the north and northwest coast of Alaska. They’re remote, have no road access and few nutrition options. Harsh conditions and minimal infrastructure make air and water transportation unreliable. Catch limits that would be set under this legislation are necessary as a matter of food security for whaling communities.”

“The science shows that the bowhead stock is growing and that Alaska Eskimos have been responsible stewards of the resource. We are not going to let IWC politics result in our Alaska communities being denied access to their traditional food source,” said **Rep. Young**.

The IWC is the body created by the International Convention for the Regulation of Whaling, a 1946 treaty that the US has ratified and was instrumental in negotiating. If the IWC fails to act on the US request, the treaty still allows for aboriginal subsistence whaling on bowhead whales, but without numeric limits set by the IWC the US would have to determine how many whales can be taken annually to meet subsistence need as required under the treaty.

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